# A PRIMER OF WORDSWORTH: WITH A CRITICAL ESSAY

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A Primer of Wordsworth: With a Critical Essay by Laurie Magnus

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# LAURIE MAGNUS

# A PRIMER OF WORDSWORTH: WITH A CRITICAL ESSAY



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# PRIMER OF WORDSWORTH

WITH

### A CRITICAL ESSAY

BY

LAURIE MAGNUS, B.A. Oxon.

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### CHAPTER I

### BIOGRAPHY

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, whose life and works it is the object of this Primer to make easy of access, was born at Cockermouth, in Cumberland, in the month of spring which he made peculiarly his own—on April 7th, 1770. He was the second of five children, four sons and a daughter, born to John Wordsworth, of yeoman descent, law agent to Lord Lonsdale, and Anne, his wife, daughter of Christopher Cookson, of Penrith. He died in the same month, on the anniversary of Shakespeare's birth and death on April 23rd, 1850. The eighty years covered by his life are a critical chapter in the history of the west. But of the movements which made that period remarkable, a single feature stands prominently out—the search for liberty, and its experiment in democracy. To this master-problem of his age Wordsworth's genius was given.

The record of the poet's life falls naturally into two unequal divisions, the first of personal, the second of literary interest. The first ends about 1795, in Words-worth's twenty-sixth year, and is faithfully narrated in his autobiographical poem, The Prelude. The second extends from that date to his death, and its interest is practically limited to the contents-tables of his works. The key to this division lies in the fact that, up to the date of departure mentioned, Wordsworth followed the letter of historical

1770

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events, but confined himself, after that year, to the interpretation of their spirit and ideal. He changed from the pioneer of revolution to the prophet of freedom.

There was more of the revolutionary than of the prophet in William Wordsworth, the child. "Fair seed-time had my soul," he writes, and he tells us how from babyhood itself he enjoyed the licence of the open air. Derwent, the river on which Cockermouth, his birthplace, stands, murmured his lullables even in his nurse's arms,

"giving me,
Amid the fretful dwellings of mankind,
A foretaste, a dim earnest, of the calm
That Nature breathes among the hills and groves" (i. 278)."

And when he arrived at the discretion of walking, the wise young parents † respected the savagery of childhood:

"Oh, many a time have I, a five years' child,
In a small mill-race severed from his stream,
Made one long bathing of a summer's day;
Basked in the sun, and plunged and basked again
Alternate, all a summer's day, or scoured
The sandy fields, leaping through flowery groves
Of yellow ragwort; or, when rock and hill,
The woods, and distant Skiddaw's lofty height,
Were bronzed with deepest radiance, stood alone
Beneath the sky, as if I had been born
On Indian plains, and from my mother's hut
Had run abroad in wantonness, to sport
A naked savage, in the thunder shower" (i. 288).

He was not always alone. There was a village school which he attended, kept by Dame Birkett at Penrith, where

\* The quotations thus designated by book and line in the present chapter are taken from The Prelude.

† John Wordsworth had been twenty-five, and Anne nineteen, at the time of their marriage.